

SPEECH

OF

HON. CHARLES SUMNER,

OF

MASSACHUSETTS,

FOR

WELCOME TO LOUIS KOSSUTH.

Made in the Senate of the United States, December 10, 1851.

WASHINGTON, D. C.:
BUELL & BLANCHARD, PRINTERS.
1851.

S P E E C H .

Mr. SEWARD, of New York, brought forward in the Senate the following joint resolution :

Be it Resolved, &c., That Congress, in the name and behalf of the people of the United States, give to Louis Kossuth a cordial welcome to the capital and of the country, and that a copy of this resolution be transmitted to him by the President of the United States."

December 9th, Mr. BERRIEN, of Georgia, addressed the Senate at length in opposition to any action by Congress, and, in closing his speech, moved the following amendment :

And be it further Resolved, That the welcome thus afforded to Louis Kossuth be extended to his associates who have landed on our shores ; but while welcoming these Hungarian patriots to an asylum in our country, and to the protection which our laws do and always will afford to them, it is due to candor to declare that it is not the purpose of Congress to depart from the settled policy of this Government, which forbids all interference with the domestic concerns of other nations."

December 10th. on motion of Mr. SEWARD, the Senate proceeded to the consideration of the special order, being his resolution of welcome to Kossuth.

Mr. SUMNER then addressed the Senate as follows :

MR. PRESIDENT : Words are sometimes things ; and I cannot disguise from myself that the resolution in honor of Louis Kossuth, now pending before the Senate, when finally passed, will be an act of no small significance in the history of our country. The Senator from Georgia [Mr. BERRIEN] was right when he said that it was no unmeaning compliment. Beyond its immediate welcome to an illustrious stranger, it will help to combine and direct the sentiments of our own people everywhere ; it will inspire all in other lands who are engaged in the contest for freedom ; it will challenge the disturbed attention of despots ; and it will become a precedent whose importance will grow, in the thick-coming events of the future, with the growing might of the Republic. In this view, it becomes us to consider well what we do, and to understand the grounds of our conduct.

For myself, I am prepared to vote for it without amendment or condition of any kind, and on reasons which seem to me at

once obvious and conclusive. In assigning these I shall be brief; and let me say that, novice as I am in this hall, and, indeed, in all legislative halls, nothing but my strong interest in the question as now presented, and a hope to say something directly upon it, could prompt me thus early to mingle in these debates.

The case seems to require a statement, rather than an argument. As I understand, the last Congress requested the President to authorize the employment of one of our public vessels to receive and convey Louis Kossuth to the United States. That honorable service was performed, under the express direction of the President, and in pursuance of the vote of Congress, by one of the best-appointed ships of our navy—the steam-frigate Mississippi. Far away from our country, in foreign waters, in the currents of the Bosphorus, the Hungarian chief, passing from his Turkish exile, first pressed the deck of this gallant vessel; first came under the protection of our national flag, and, for the first time in his life, rested beneath the ensign of an unquestioned Republic. From that moment he became our guest. The Republic—which, thus far, he had seen only in delighted dream or vision—was now his host; and though this relation was interrupted for a few weeks by his wise and brilliant visit to England, yet its duties and its pleasures, as I confidently submit, are not yet ended. The liberated exile is now at our gates. Sir, we cannot do things by halves; and the hospitality thus, under the auspices of Congress, begun, must, under the auspices of Congress, be continued. The hearts of the people are already open to receive him; Congress cannot turn its back upon him.

But I would join in this welcome, not merely because it is essential to complete and crown the work of the last Congress, but because our guest deserves it at our hands. The distinction is great, I know; but it is not so great as his deserts. He deserves it as the early, constant, and incorruptible champion of the Liberal Cause in Hungary, who, while yet young, with unconscious power, girded himself for the contest, and by a series of masterly labors, with voice and pen, in parliamentary debates, and in the discussions of the press, breathed into his country the breath of life. He deserves it by the great principles of true democracy which he caused to be recognised—rep-

resentation of the people without distinction of rank or birth, and *equality before the law*. He deserves it by the trials he has undergone, in prison and in exile. He deserves it by the precious truth, which he now so eloquently proclaims, of the Fraternity of Nations.

As I regard his course, I am filled with reverence and awe. I see in him, more than in any other living man, the power which may be exerted by a single, earnest, honest soul, in a noble cause. In himself he is more than a whole cabinet—more than a whole army. I watch him in Hungary, while, like Carnot in France, he “organizes victory;” I follow him in exile to distant Asiatic Turkey, and there find him, with only a scanty band of attendants, in weakness and confinement, still the dread of despots; I sympathize with him in his happy release; and now, as he comes more within the sphere of our immediate observation, amazement fills us all in the contemplation of his career, while he proceeds from land to land, from city to city, and, with words of matchless eloquence, seems at times the fiery sword of freedom, and then the trumpet of resurrection to the nations—*Tuba mirum spargens sonum*.

I know not how others have been impressed; but I can call to mind no incident in history—no event of peace or war—certainly none of war—more strongly calculated—better adapted—to touch and exalt the imagination and the heart than his recent visit to England. He landed on the southern coast, not far from where William of Normandy, nearly eight centuries ago, had landed; not far from where, nineteen centuries ago, Julius Cæsar had landed also; but William, on the field of Hastings, and Cæsar, in his adventurous expedition, made no conquest comparable in grandeur to that achieved by the unarmed and unattended Hungarian. A multitudinous people, outnumbering far the armies of those earlier times, was subdued by his wisdom and eloquence; and this exile, proceeding from place to place, traversing the country, at last, in the very heart of the Kingdom, threw down the gauntlet of the Republic. Without equivocation, amidst the supporters of monarchy, in the shadow of a lofty throne, he proclaimed himself a republican, and proclaimed the republic as his cherished aspiration for Hungary. And yet, amidst the excitements of this unparalleled scene, with that discretion which I pray may ever attend him, as a good

angel—the ancient poet aptly tells us that no Divinity is absent where Prudence is present—he forbore all suggestion of interference with the existing institutions of the country whose guest he was, recognising that vital principle of self-government, by virtue of which every State chooses for itself the institutions and rulers which it prefers.

Such a character, thus grandly historic—a living Wallace—a living Tell—I had almost said a living Washington—deserves our homage. Nor am I tempted to ask if there be any precedent for the resolution now under consideration. There is a time for all things; and the time has come for us to make a precedent in harmony with his unprecedented career. The occasion is fit; the hero is near; let us speak our welcome. It is true that, unlike Lafayette, he has never directly served our country; but I cannot admit that on this account he is less worthy. Like Lafayette, he perilled life and all; like Lafayette, he has done penance in an Austrian dungeon; like Lafayette, he has served the cause of freedom; and whosoever serves this cause, wheresoever he may be, in whatever land, is entitled, according to his works, to the gratitude of every true American bosom—of every true lover of mankind.

The resolution before us commends itself by its simplicity and completeness. In this respect it seems to me preferable to that of the Senator from Illinois, [Mr. SHIELDS;] nor is it obnoxious to objections urged against that of the Senator from Mississippi, [Mr. FOOTE;] nor do I see that it can give any just umbrage, in our diplomatic relations, even to the sensitive representative of the house of Austria. Though we have the high authority of the President, in his message, for styling our guest “Governor”—a title which seems to imply the *de facto* independence of Hungary at the very time when our Government declined to acknowledge it—the resolution avoids this difficulty, and speaks of him without title of any kind—simply as a private citizen. As such, it offers him a welcome to the capital and to the country.

The comity of nations I respect. To the behests of the law of nations I profoundly bow. As in our domestic affairs, all acts are brought to the Constitution, as to a touchstone, so in our foreign affairs, all acts are brought to the touchstone of the law of nations—that supreme law, the world’s collected will,

which overarches the Grand Commonwealth of Christian States. What that forbids, I forbear to do. But no text of this voluminous code, no commentary, no gloss, can be found which forbids us to welcome any exile of freedom.

Looking at this resolution in its various lights—as a carrying out of the act of the last Congress, as justly due to the exalted character of our guest, and as proper in form and consistent with the law of nations—it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion in its favor. On its merits it would naturally be adopted. And here I might stop.

But an appeal has been made against the resolution, on grounds which seem to me extraneous and irrelevant. It has been attempted to involve it with the critical question of intervention by our country in European affairs; and recent speeches in England and New York have been adduced to show that such intervention is sought by our guest. It is sufficient to say in reply to this suggestion, introduced by the Senator from Georgia [Mr. BERRIEN] with a skill which all might envy—and also by the Senator from New Jersey [Mr. MILLER]—*that no such intervention is promised or implied by the resolution.* It does not appear on the face of the resolution; it is not in any way suggested by the resolution, directly or indirectly. It can only be found in the imagination, the anxieties, or the fears of Senators! It is a mere ghost, and not a reality. As such we may dismiss it. But I feel strongly on this point, and desire to go further. Here, again, I shall be brief; for the occasion allows me to state conclusions only, and not arguments.

While thus warmly—with my heart in my hand—joining in this tribute, I wish to be understood as in no respect encouraging any idea of belligerent intervention in European affairs. Such a system would have in it no element of just self-defence, and it would open phials of perplexities and ills which I trust our country will never be called to affront. But I inculcate no frigid isolation. God forbid that we should ever close our ears to the cry of distress, or cease to swell with indignation at the steps of tyranny! In the wisdom of Washington we may find perpetual counsel. Like Washington, in his eloquent words to the Minister of the French Directory, I would offer sympathy and God-speed to all, in every land, who struggle for Human Rights; but, sternly as Washington on another occasion,

against every pressure, against all popular appeals, against all solicitations, against all blandishments, I would uphold with steady hand the peaceful neutrality of the country. Could I now approach our mighty guest, I would say to him, with the respectful frankness of a friend, "Be content with the outgushing sympathy which you now so marvellously inspire everywhere throughout this wide-spread land, and may it strengthen your soul! Trust in God, in the inspiration of your ~~own~~ ^{own}, and in the Great Future, pregnant with freedom for all mankind. But respect our ideas, as we respect yours. Do not seek to reverse our traditional, established policy of peace. Do not, under the too plausible sophism of upholding non-intervention, provoke ~~American intervention on distant European soil.~~ Leave us to tread where Washington points the way."

And yet, with these convictions, Mr. President, which I now most sincerely express, I trust the Senator from Georgia [Mr. BARNES] will pardon me when I say I cannot join in his proposed amendment; and for this specific reason. It attaches to an act of courtesy and welcome a condition which, however just as an independent proposition, is most ungracious in such connection. It is out of place, and everything out of place is, to a certain extent, offensive. If adopted, it would impair, if not destroy, the value of our act. A generous hospitality will not make terms or conditions with a guest; and such hospitality, I trust, Congress will tender to Louis Kossuth.